

## House Republican Press Release

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Press Office: 860-240-8700

### Finally, A Budget for Fairfield County



*By State Rep. Toni Boucher, R-143<sup>rd</sup>, Wilton, Norwalk*

At last, Fairfield County is seeing a state budget that deals with our needs. After years of legislative efforts and small steps by the state Department of Transportation (DOT), Gov. M. Jodi Rell's has proposed a budget that addresses our crucial issues.

The governor directs the DOT to begin purchasing 300 new rail cars to replace the unreliable, 30-year-old Metro North commuter rail fleet. Transportation is the single biggest issue facing our area, and finally our voices have been heard. In the past, state government has turned a deaf ear to our area's transportation needs.

Now, there is a \$667 million commitment of the state's share for the rail car purchase price. There is \$300 million for a new rail maintenance facility. There is \$100 million to eliminate bottlenecks at I-95 entrances and exits.

As a result of a meeting I arranged, the state DOT commissioner will attend all Metro-North administrative meetings, and our governor requested the New York governor to add Connecticut as a voting member of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority that runs Metro-North.

In the budget, the governor proposes a tuition freeze at Connecticut state colleges and universities, to help keep them affordable for most families. There will be a modest increase in state aid for public schools, for special education students and for early childhood education. There will be more state troopers for highway safety patrol.

To help keep retirees in Connecticut, the governor has endorsed, and I support, a House Republican plan to begin exempting retirement benefits from the state's five percent income tax.

Overall, the proposed \$31-billion two-year spending package rises about 3.9 percent a year in each of the next two fiscal years beginning July 1, 2005, and July 1, 2006, respectively.

In the process, however, the governor had to make tough decisions to close a \$1.2-billion gap between state revenues and projected state spending. There will be one-cent a year gas tax increases beginning this year, and a \$1 per trip rail surcharge starting in 2008 to help offset the new capital expenditures.

Tax hikes will be limited, so as to do as little damage as possible to the Connecticut economy and to the state's relatively slow job growth. However, she proposes a 74-cent tax increase on a pack of cigarettes, proportional increases on other tobacco products and a 15 percent increase in the alcoholic beverage tax.

You may ask yourself, why was there still a budget gap, even after the state has emerged from the 2001 recession? The answers are two fold. On the one-hand, state spending continues to grow faster than revenues, especially the federally mandated Medicaid health care program for the poor and disabled. The budget proposes actions to help control such costs.

Secondly, past legislative majorities have insisted on using one-time revenues and accounting devices to balance recent state budgets. Such schemes only make budget choices more difficult in following years, when these revenues are no longer available. There also has been a practice of bonding budget overruns. For both of those reasons, I have voted against most of the previous budgets.

The first budget presented by our new governor has addressed the long-term picture, balanced the budget without gimmicks and moved to replenish the state Rainy Day Fund for future emergencies and economic downturns.

Between now and the legislature's adjournment on June 8, there will be tremendous pressure to boost spending beyond the governor's original proposals. Such additional spending would violate the state spending cap, which limits spending hikes to about 4 per cent a year. Additional spending would also require more severe tax increases, as well. I will continue to oppose such efforts and any others that violate the constitutional spending cap that 80 percent of statewide voters approved in 1992.

Certainly, the budget proposal is a good start, which will be refined and adjusted over coming months. Fairfield County's transportation needs are recognized and addressed. The social service safety net remains in place, and other state needs are met.

There is indeed a new wind blowing, led by the governor's honest, straightforward and thoughtful style. Her no-nonsense, common sense budget attempts to hold down spending, resist across the board tax increases and keep our economic future looking positive.

During the next few months, I will be working on the Appropriations subcommittees for transportation, education, higher education and collective bargaining, deliberating on many aspects of the budget. Many of the budget's line items and the language will undoubtedly change. The final details will determine if it will receive my vote.

If you have questions or have a position on these or other issues, please do not hesitate to contact me at 1-800-842-1423. Thank you.

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